

Annual report 2023 WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan



Annual report 2023 WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan

Abstract

This report summarizes the activities of the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan during 2023. The Country Office supports national health authorities in improving public health and health-care access. Key accomplishments span three areas: advancing universal health coverage, responding to health emergencies, and promoting population health. Achievements include expanding mobile clinics, strengthening emergency services, enhancing laboratory capacity, improving infection control, bolstering immunization and expanding mental health services. The Country Office employed strategies such as ensuring stronger and more competitive workforce capacity, promoting knowledge generation and use for decision-making, fostering collaboration across institutions and countries, and enhancing public awareness of health issues. These efforts have advanced national health priorities and promoted equitable health-care access in Azerbaijan.

Keywords

HEALTH CARE, AZERBAIJAN, EMERGENCY HEALTH SERVICES, UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE

Document number: WHO/EURO:2024-10547-50319-75914 (PDF)

Document number: WHO/EURO:2024-10547-50319-76389 (print)

© World Health Organization 2024

Some rights reserved. This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO licence (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/igo>).

Under the terms of this licence, you may copy, redistribute and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, provided the work is appropriately cited, as indicated below. In any use of this work, there should be no suggestion that WHO endorses any specific organization, products or services. The use of the WHO logo is not permitted. If you adapt the work, then you must license your work under the same or equivalent Creative Commons licence. If you create a translation of this work, you should add the following disclaimer along with the suggested citation: "This translation was not created by the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO is not responsible for the content or accuracy of this translation. The original English edition shall be the binding and authentic edition: Annual report 2023: WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2024".

Any mediation relating to disputes arising under the licence shall be conducted in accordance with the mediation rules of the World Intellectual Property Organization (<http://www.wipo.int/amc/en/mediation/rules/>).

Suggested citation. Annual report 2023: WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2024. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

Cataloguing-in-Publication (CIP) data. CIP data are available at <http://apps.who.int/iris>.

Sales, rights and licensing. To purchase WHO publications, see <http://apps.who.int/bookorders>. To submit requests for commercial use and queries on rights and licensing, see <https://www.who.int/about/policies/publishing/copyright>

Third-party materials. If you wish to reuse material from this work that is attributed to a third party, such as tables, figures or images, it is your responsibility to determine whether permission is needed for that reuse and to obtain permission from the copyright holder. The risk of claims resulting from infringement of any third-party-owned component in the work rests solely with the user.

General disclaimers. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of WHO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Dotted and dashed lines on maps represent approximate border lines for which there may not yet be full agreement.

The mention of specific companies or of certain manufacturers' products does not imply that they are endorsed or recommended by WHO in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned. Errors and omissions excepted, the names of proprietary products are distinguished by initial capital letters.

All reasonable precautions have been taken by WHO to verify the information contained in this publication. However, the published material is being distributed without warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied. The responsibility for the interpretation and use of the material lies with the reader. In no event shall WHO be liable for damages arising from its use.

Photos: ©WHO

Designed by: PELLEGRINI

Contents

Foreword	iv
Acknowledgement	v
Abbreviations	vi
Executive summary	vii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan	2
1.2 Country background	2
1.3 National priorities for sustainable development	2
1.4 National priorities for health and well-being	3
1.5 Objectives of the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan	3
2. Year in review	7
3. Key achievements towards advancing GPW 13	15
3.1 Achieving UHC by expanding access to health services	16
3.2 Addressing health emergencies	20
3.3 Promoting healthier populations	24
4. Mechanisms of action	29
4.1 Ensuring stronger and more competitive workforce capacity	30
4.2 Promoting knowledge generation and use for policy- and decision-making	31
4.3 Promoting collaboration and exchange across institutions, regions, sectors and with other countries	32
4.4 Enhancing public awareness on health issues and health-care services	33
5. Lessons learned	35
6. Looking forward	39
References	41



Foreword

Reflecting on the accomplishments of the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan across 2023, this annual report is presented with immense pride and deep commitment. Despite multiple challenges, the collective efforts of the Country Office have been consistent in promoting health, ensuring safety and advocating for the well-being of all individuals in Azerbaijan.

Throughout 2023 several key areas were focused upon, including health system strengthening, emergency preparedness and response, disease prevention and control, and health promotion. Additionally, key health policy challenges were prioritized, including universal health coverage, financial sustainability, public awareness of health and the quality of health-care services. Despite the ever-evolving landscape of public health, the Country Office has diligently worked alongside the Government, partner organizations and communities in order to both address emerging health threats and improve health outcomes across the country.

This commitment to capacity-building has been paramount in strengthening the health-care system and workforce in Azerbaijan. Through technical assistance, training and knowledge sharing, health-care professionals have been empowered to increase their capacity. Moreover, the collaborative spirit fostered within the Country Office is not only a source of pride but is also forming a nexus attracting young people passionate about public health and social change. It is a testament to these efforts that the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan has attained the third global ranking among WHO offices for the active involvement of United Nations volunteers in 2023.

Among these achievements, the Country Office can list primary health care strengthening in Shamakhi, expanded mental health services in conflict-affected regions, the initiative for the establishment of an emergency medical team and the digitalized cold-chain inventory system in the country.

As Azerbaijan looks to the future, the Country Office remains committed to its mission of “promoting health, keeping the world safe and serving the vulnerable”. The challenges ahead may be daunting, but with dedication, collaboration and innovation, the Country Office is confident in its ability to overcome them and build a healthier, safer future for all.

Deep gratitude is extended to partners such as the Ministry of Health, United Nations agencies, other national health agencies and the Azerbaijani people for their trust and collaboration. Together, we will continue to strive towards our shared vision of a healthier and more resilient Azerbaijan.



Dr Hande Harmanci

WHO Representative in Azerbaijan and
Head of the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan

Acknowledgements

This report was made possible through the collaborative efforts and support of all team members from the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan.

The report was written by Krista Kruja (Evidence Link), under the guidance of Hande Harmanci (WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan) alongside technical guidance and coordination from Emilia Aragón de León and H. Ibrahim Durak.

Gratitude is also extended for the input and effort towards data validation from Saida Aliyeva, Fanara Bunyadzada, Tural Gulu and Gunel Isakova, all of whom made content development possible.

The team from the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan extends heartfelt thanks and appreciation to all colleagues for their contributions in providing and sourcing data, technical input and feedback and comments during the process of drafting and revising this document. Thanks are extended in particular to Sara Aghayeva, Yaqub Allahverdiyev, Azad Garibov, Narmin Guluzade, Sevinj Hasanova, Shahnaz Hasanova, Rena Huseynova, Elturan Ismayilov, Narmin Maharramova, Nilufer Mammadova, Hasan Odabasioglu, Javahir Suleymanova, Elmin Taghiyev, Sevgi Turan and Belgin Unal.

Without these contributions and thorough feedback, this report showcasing the work of the Country Office would not have been possible.

Abbreviations

AMR	antimicrobial resistance
AMU	Azerbaijan Medical University
COPC	community-oriented primary health care
ECS	emergency care system
EMT	Emergency Medical Team
GPW 13	WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023
HAI	health-care-associated infection
IPC	infection prevention and control
JEE	Joint External Evaluation (mission)
mhGAP	WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme
MHI	Mandatory Health Insurance
NCD	noncommunicable disease
PHC	primary health care
RCCE	risk communication and community engagement
SAMHI	State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance
SHA	System of Health Accounts
TABIB	Administration of the Regional Medical Divisions of Azerbaijan
UHC	universal health coverage



Executive summary

The primary role of the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan is to support national health authorities in implementing their remit to safeguard public health and improve health-care access. This objective is directly aligned with strategic priorities that emphasize primary health care (PHC), financial sustainability, public awareness, service quality and institutional efficiency, as well as with existing national directives to foster intersectoral collaboration and promote health equity and resilience in alignment with global and regional health agendas and partnerships.

The Country Office focuses its efforts on advancing national health priorities through three main areas of work: achieving universal health coverage (UHC), preparing for and responding to health emergencies, and promoting healthier populations, in line with the targets of the Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023 (GPW 13). Developed through a collaborative process involving all WHO teams within the country, this report highlights key achievements and the mechanisms used to deliver them across these areas.

During 2023 the Office engaged in discourse with over 14 000 individuals, including health-care workers, patients, public health practitioners and policy-makers – both in person and online – via awareness-raising and communications campaigns, technical support, assistance and training programmes, and through many other activities at both national and regional levels.

Advancing UHC and access to health care

In response to significant challenges such as high out-of-pocket expenditure and staffing shortages, WHO has supported national efforts to strengthen the health-care system. Notable achievements include:

- ◆ increasing health service availability, for example through mobile clinics that now cover over 15 000 people in the previously underserved Shamakhi Region;
- ◆ showcasing the feasibility of motivating health-care workers to take up employment in remote regions and in the much-needed field of PHC through appropriate incentive structures;
- ◆ strengthening the capacity of national institutions to use data in health finance management; and
- ◆ improving the quality of emergency care services and establishing an initial specialized and standardized emergency medicine training programme in the country.

Addressing health emergencies

WHO has supported Azerbaijan's efforts to enhance health emergency response by addressing issues such as fragmented surveillance, infection prevention and control (IPC) systems and gaps in operational readiness and risk communication.

Notable achievements include:

- ◆ strengthening readiness to respond to health emergencies through enhanced laboratory capacity, completion of a Joint External Evaluation (JEE) mission to assess Azerbaijan's capacity to prevent, detect and rapidly respond to public health threats and the establishment of the Emergency Medical Team (EMT);
- ◆ improving IPC through the establishment and implementation of national norms, standards and improved collaborations; and
- ◆ enhancing country-wide capacity for better risk communication and community engagement (RCCE), as well as infodemic management to increase public awareness of vaccines and effectively manage misinformation.

Promoting healthier populations

Population health in Azerbaijan faces significant challenges due to the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) as well as regional inequities between urban and rural areas in access to care (including for mental health and psychosocial support) and declining childhood vaccination rates, exacerbated by vaccine hesitancy and logistical challenges. WHO has supported national efforts to address these issues and strengthen public health functions. Notable achievements include:

- ◆ facilitating institutional collaboration to enhance mental health services, expanding access for over 35 000 patients in conflict-affected regions through PHC facilities and reaching over 5000 individuals through six educational campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and increasing service uptake;
- ◆ expanding immunization capacities by establishing a cold-chain infrastructure for vaccine storage and transportation and delivering campaigns that have resulted in the immunization of hundreds of children in regions with historically low vaccination rates, reducing caregiver hesitation by up to 45% in some areas; and
- ◆ strengthening public health functions by developing a summary health profile to identify key health challenges in Azerbaijan, convening 13 Government agencies to improve public health coordination and produce evidence-informed recommendations to modernize hygiene and epidemiology centres.

©WHO





Mechanisms of action

Four key mechanisms have underpinned the Country Office's efforts to advance these priorities:



ensuring stronger and more competitive workforce capacity



fostering collaboration across institutions and countries



promoting knowledge generation and use for decision-making



enhancing public awareness of health issues.

Several lessons have been learned through these efforts:

- ◆ capacity-building and networking can be used to incentivize health workers to work in underserved areas;
- ◆ trusted communication channels can be leveraged to enhance public awareness on health issues;
- ◆ cascade training can yield sustainable outcomes in capacity-building initiatives; and
- ◆ systemic change can be achieved by leveraging the dedication of motivated individuals.

The collaborative efforts of the Country Office have yielded tangible results in advancing national health priorities and promoting equitable access to health-care services, while still navigating complex socioeconomic challenges and global health crises. Through strategic partnerships and innovative approaches, WHO continues to play a crucial role in strengthening Azerbaijan's health-care system and improving the health and well-being of its population.





1. Introduction

1.1 The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan

Established in June 1994 in Baku, the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan is committed to enhancing health outcomes and acts as the primary partner and hub implementing WHO programmes, activities and initiatives in Azerbaijan.

The Country Office convenes diverse expertise, assembling national and international specialists from multiple fields including public health, vaccine-preventable diseases and immunization, communicable and noncommunicable diseases, emergency medical response, risk communication, and infection prevention and control (IPC). Each team member plays an essential role in driving the nation's health agenda forward, contributing their unique skills and knowledge to achieve common goals.

At its core, the Country Office operates as a strategic partner in health policy-making. It responds to Azerbaijan's needs according to a holistic health system approach, providing expert guidance, fostering local partnerships and establishing essential standards and agreements.

1.2 Country background

Azerbaijan is a presidential republic situated in the South Caucasus. The population was estimated as 10 127 100 at the beginning of 2023, and notable demographic trends include a growing elderly population and significant rural-urban disparities, with 45.4% of the population residing in rural areas. As an upper-middle-income country, Azerbaijan has shown resilience in its economic recovery despite facing triple shocks in 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic, energy market volatility and armed conflict with Armenia.¹ While Azerbaijan has made progress on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (1) – particularly in terms of poverty, nutrition, education, clean water and sustainable cities and communities – challenges persist.

Amidst these dynamics, Azerbaijan is actively pursuing avenues for growth and development. Initiatives to enhance education and vocational training signal a commitment to addressing skill shortages and fostering economic prosperity. Additionally, efforts to strengthen disaster resilience and adapt to climate change impacts align with broader sustainability goals, recognizing the importance of environmental stewardship in ensuring long-term prosperity.

1.3 National priorities for sustainable development

The national development agenda outlined in Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development (3) sets out the following strategic goals:

- ◆ a steadily growing, competitive economy;
- ◆ a dynamic, inclusive society based on social justice;
- ◆ areas of modern innovations and competitive human capital;
- ◆ reintegration, recovery and the return of populations to the territories liberated from occupation; and
- ◆ a clean environment and a country of green growth.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021–2025 (2) further reinforces these goals through four strategic priority areas: inclusive growth, stronger institutions, environmental protection and gender equity. While no national health strategy is officially adopted, health is integrated into both Azerbaijan 2030 and the Framework, emphasizing the importance of strengthening PHC and preventative care.

¹Data based on the WHO Country Cooperation strategy, Azerbaijan 2024–2030.



1.4 National priorities for health and well-being

The remit of the Ministry of Health of Azerbaijan is to protect the health of the population, inform the public about the importance of a healthy lifestyle, implement preventative measures to prevent diseases, increase access to high-quality health services to meet the needs of every citizen, and ensure the development of medical education and science.

The WHO Cooperation Strategy notes that the “Strategic Plan on the Implementation of Mandatory Health Insurance in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2021–2023” is the latest health-related strategic document (1). The Plan primarily focuses on introducing Mandatory Health Insurance (MHI) and delineates targets and initiatives for the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance (SAMHI). It additionally identifies five strategic directions beyond MHI:

- ◆ establishing universal health care (UHC) provision;
- ◆ enhancing financial sustainability within the health-care sector;
- ◆ heightening public awareness of health-related issues;
- ◆ enhancing the quality of health-care services; and
- ◆ rationalizing the network of health-care institutions to optimize efficiency and effectiveness.

From 2017 onwards the Azerbaijani Government has implemented a series of health-care reforms to strengthen financing mechanisms, improve access to services and enhance financial protection. These reforms resulted in the establishment of the SAMHI and the Administration of the Regional Medical Divisions of Azerbaijan (TABIB; instituted under SAMHI’s umbrella) to oversee the implementation of MHI nationwide. These reforms introduced MHI, standardized health benefit packages and centralized procurement of services. MHI covers 100% of the population, and the Health Benefits Package was expanded in 2023 to encompass 3344 services (4).

Primary health care (PHC) is one of the most effective tools to guide Azerbaijan towards UHC, and strengthening PHC will support the Government’s goal to improve access to services and enhance financial protection. To this end, WHO has supported health authorities in Azerbaijan on initiatives to promote greater health awareness and disease prevention in collaboration with key stakeholders such as the Public Health and Reforms Centre, TABIB and SAMHI.

1.5 Objectives of the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan

The work of WHO in Azerbaijan is guided by the priorities of the Government and the Ministry of Health, the WHO Thirteenth General Programme of Work, 2019–2023 (GPW 13) and the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – United Action for Better Health in Europe, as well as objectives agreed with other United Nations partners (Box 1).

Box 1. Priorities and strategic objectives relevant to WHO's activities in Azerbaijan

Strategic goals from Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development (3):

- a steadily growing, competitive economy;
- a dynamic, inclusive society based on social justice;
- areas of modern innovations and competitive human capital;
- reintegration, recovery and the return of populations to the territories liberated from occupation; and
- a clean environment and a country of green growth.

Priority areas for Azerbaijan according to the United Nations Sustainable Development Framework (2):

- inclusive growth that reduces vulnerability and builds resilience;
- stronger institutions for better public and social services delivery;
- protecting the environment and addressing climate change; and
- a gender-equitable society that empowers women and girls.

Mission of the Ministry of Health of Azerbaijan (5):

- protect the health of the population;
- stronger institutions for delivering public health and social services;
- implement preventive measures to prevent diseases;
- increase access to high-quality health services to meet the needs of every citizen; and
- ensure the development of medical education and science.

The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan focuses on three main areas:



achieving **UHC** for all citizens by:

- ◆ improving health service availability and quality
- ◆ strengthening PHC
- ◆ ensuring financial sustainability of the health-care system;



preparing for and responding to **health emergencies** by

- ◆ enhancing operational readiness and capabilities for risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) and infodemic management; and
- ◆ preventing and controlling infections, including for priority diseases, and mitigating the risks of antimicrobial resistance (AMR); and



promoting **healthier populations** by

- ◆ strengthening public health institutions and workforce capacity
- ◆ enhancing institutions for public and social services delivery
- ◆ expanding access of mental health services
- ◆ improving immunization coverage.

The Country Office invests in key enablers to support sustained change in these areas, including:



ensuring stronger and more competitive **workforce capacity**



fostering collaboration and exchange across institutions, regions, sectors and with other countries



promoting knowledge generation and use for policy- and decision-making



enhancing **public awareness** of health issues and health-care services.

The following sections highlight key achievements related to these priorities and the mechanisms in which the Country Office invests.

This report was crafted collaboratively, involving all teams within the Country Office. Activities undertaken throughout the year were compiled using a standardized data collection tool and subsequently analysed. Additionally, the Country Office team participated in a workshop to pinpoint key achievements, lessons learned and the mechanisms driving progress. Through an iterative process, feedback from teams was continually integrated, ensuring both the accuracy of the report and its comprehensive representation of the diverse areas of work and objectives from across teams within the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan.





2. Year in review



14 000

Over 14 000 individuals were engaged, including health-care workers, patients, policy-makers and public health practitioners.



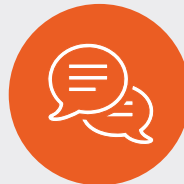
80%

Around 80% of activities were conducted in person or included an in-person component.

Activities comprised:



Awareness raising



**Communications/
advocacy**



**Implementation/
service provision**



Meetings and events



**Resource mobilization
and alliances**



Technical assistance



Training

23 Regions

Both national and regional levels were targeted, including regions such as Agdash, Aghdam, Aghjabadi, Astara, Baku, Barda, Bilasuvar, Fuzuli, Gabala, Goychay, Ismayilli, Jalilabad, Lankaran, Lerik, Mingachevir, Nakhchivan, Neftchala, Oghuz, Salyan, Shaki, Tartar, Yardimli and Yevlakh.



Map production: WHO Regional Office for Europe, based on United Nations map (6).

The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan has addressed a number of topics:

- ◆ AMR
- ◆ communicable diseases
- ◆ emergency care systems (ECS)
- ◆ emergency preparedness and response
- ◆ the Green Hospitals Initiative/ environment and health
- ◆ health professional education
- ◆ health workforce
- ◆ healthy settings
- ◆ hospitals, quality and patient safety
- ◆ immunization
- ◆ IPC
- ◆ laboratory systems
- ◆ mental health and psychosocial support
- ◆ PHC
- ◆ policy and governance for health
- ◆ prison health
- ◆ public health system
- ◆ quality of care
- ◆ RCCE
- ◆ rehabilitation, assistive technology and disability inclusion
- ◆ road safety.



24 January to 10 February 2023

Modernizing educational methods and content across faculties of the Azerbaijan Medical University (AMU).

A Faculty Development Programme engaged 32 participants and 14 trainers over the course of two 7-day sessions, with the aim of modernizing educational methods and content across faculties at AMU, emphasizing learner-centred, competence-based and patient-safety-oriented approaches. The programme also aimed to facilitate the adoption of learner-centred practices from the Department of Medical and Health Education into other university departments.

February 2023

Strengthening collaboration across sectors in public health.

Health experts from across the country gathered to conduct a workshop that would analyse the breadth of stakeholders' involved in delivering essential public health functions. The output of the workshop was a stakeholder analysis that served to identify key individuals and organizations for collaboration in evaluating these functions in Azerbaijan. The workshop also served to create a shared understanding of the broad scope of public health among participants. The workshop was organized by the Country Office, prompted by a request from the Ministry of Health for technical support in reforming the public health system.

March 2023

Improving the country's ability to systematically track health spending.

A workshop organized by WHO was held to introduce the System of Health Accounts (SHA). The workshop provided an overview of the methodology involved, and discussed the preliminary data needed for a health accounts study in the country. The SHA is an international accounting framework for systematically tracking health spending. Time trends of overall health spending and its components can guide future policies and investments to make health systems more responsive to people's needs.

March 2023

Building alliances to improve mental health and psychosocial support.

A coordinating group was established for the project "Coordination and Transformation of Mental Health Services in Post-conflict Settings" that represented various national and international stakeholders and actors working to improve mental health and psychosocial support in Azerbaijan.

January

February

March



26 January to 3 March 2023

Improving examination quality and elevating medical education standards.

A training programme entitled "Using Multiple Choice" was conducted at AMU. This 2-day initiative aimed to enhance participants' evaluation and assessment skills by developing their skills in writing test items at various cognitive levels, constructing valid and reliable tests, and interpreting test statistics to enhance the quality of examinations administered at the university. The programme engaged 180 instructors from the university organized into 12 groups over 6 weeks.

February 2023

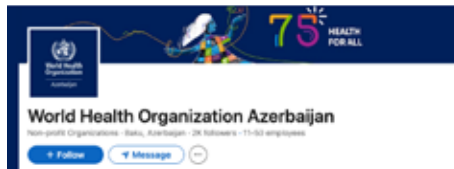
Increasing outreach to professional networks.

The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan achieved a significant milestone by establishing its official LinkedIn account, becoming the first country office in the WHO European Region to join the platform. The account has already amassed over 1500 followers and continues to grow.

February 2023

Improving training in emergency medicine to enhance the resilience of the health-care system.

The Emergency Medicine Clerkship Curriculum Development Workshop convened experts from the Country Office, Azerbaijan's ECS Capacity Group and faculty members from diverse medical specialties within AMU to jointly standardize training in emergency medicine – with a remit to enhance the resilience of the health-care system in managing pandemics and large-scale health emergencies.



March 2023

WHO certifies Azerbaijan as malaria-free.

After decades of dedicated efforts by the Government in collaboration with WHO, Azerbaijan achieved certification for the elimination of malaria. This milestone, as recognized by WHO, signifies the country's official malaria-free status. Certification is granted when a country demonstrates a consistent cessation of indigenous malaria transmission for at least three consecutive years, along with demonstrating the capacity to prevent its resurgence.

March and August 2023

Enhancing medical skills for trauma management and medical assistance.

ECS Capacity Group members undertook month-long study visits to Türkiye to enhance medical skills and gain practical experience in Turkish hospitals. The programme catered to ECS teams specializing in trauma management and medical assistance, providing tailored training modules for health-care professionals.



©WHO

April 2023

Reorienting care towards the needs of the community. A 5-day workshop was conducted involving 65 national health partners to initiate small-scale community-oriented PHC (COPC) interventions in Nasimi, a district of Baku with a population of around 300 000. Participants were introduced to the principles and methods of COPC and by the end of the 5 days collaboratively developed a comprehensive intervention plan tailored to local needs.

May 2023

Empowering the community with life-saving skills. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation awareness and training events were conducted at three Baku shopping malls as part of the Azerbaijan Pandemic Response initiative. Participants learned lifesaving resuscitation skills through hands-on practice on mannequins under instructor supervision, with over 300 people benefitting from sessions at the three shopping malls.

May 2023

Improving capacity to monitor and prevent and control health-care-associated infections (HAIs). The first pilot Point Prevalence Study of HAIs and antimicrobial use was conducted in two pilot hospitals in 2023 in Baku. The main objective was to estimate the prevalence and burden of HAIs and antimicrobial use. Based on the results, the Study identified gaps and challenges, enabling national counterparts to engage in better planning and promote the establishment of effective surveillance practices for improved control of HAIs.

May 2023 to September 2023

Raising awareness and reducing stigma for mental health.

Six educational campaigns related to mental health and psychosocial support were organized in the target regions and services were provided to about 5000 citizens within the framework of these campaigns.

June 2023

Strengthening knowledge of health-care professionals. The Country Office organized a webinar series focusing on IPC, ECS, public health and health professional education, with over 8520 diverse health-care professionals participating in 31 sessions aimed at national-level training for emergency care, establishing IPC standards and enhancing public health competencies.

April

May

June

4–6 April 2023

Improving the country's ability to systematically track health spending. The Fifth Subregional European Meeting on Tracking Health Spending using the SHA 2011 Methodology was convened in Istanbul, Türkiye. Organized by the WHO Barcelona Office for Health Systems Financing, the event gathered 80 representatives from 16 eastern European and central Asian countries, including Azerbaijan, to discuss health expenditure tracking and its impact on decision-making. This formed part of the ongoing efforts to institutionalize health spending tracking in Azerbaijan.

May 2023

Strengthening public health emergency preparedness through two key initiatives. A Joint External Evaluation (JEE) assessed 19 technical areas to enhance the implementation of the International Health Regulations 2005. Additionally, a laboratory assessment mission (8–19 May) evaluated and improved laboratory systems, followed by a workshop to develop a national laboratory policy and strategic plan.

May 2023

Highlighting WHO's contribution to global health. WHO's 75th anniversary was celebrated through various events, including engaging medical students at AMU and hosting a reception for partners and diplomatic missions. A cultural concert and photography exhibition highlighted WHO's contributions to global health, fostering collaboration and celebrating its legacy.

19 June to 5 July 2023

Assessing delivery of essential public health services. An expert team made up of national and international WHO experts, along with representatives from the Republican Hygiene and Epidemiology Centre, visited selected hygiene and epidemiology centres in Astara, Ganja, Masalli, Sabail and Sabunchu. The intended purpose was to evaluate the scope and capacity of these institutions to deliver essential public health services and to provide recommendations for structural and functional reforms to strengthen public health.



July 2023

Bringing together directors of hygiene and epidemiology centres. For the first time in many years, a 2-day workshop convened directors from hygiene and epidemiology centres across Azerbaijan, as well as representatives from the Ministry of Health, the Republican Hygiene and Epidemiology Centre and WHO, to discuss the challenges and opportunities involved in transforming the delivery of public health services in Azerbaijan. The results of this workshop have since informed a new set of recommendations to strengthen public health.

28–30 August 2023

Providing support for health-care reforms in Nakhchivan. A delegation from the WHO Country Office visited Nakhchivan at the invitation of the Ministry of Health of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. The purpose of the visit was to discuss health-care reforms, assess medical service quality and inspect the newly established family health care centres in Nakhchivan City and the Ordubad and Sharur Regions.

September 2023

Showcasing Azerbaijan's progress in strengthening PHC at international forums. A delegation from the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan, SAMHI and TABIB participated in the 18th European Forum for Primary Care in Barcelona, Spain. The delegation attended a master class on "Integrated Community Care" and conducted a seminar regarding COPC entitled "Integrating PHC and Public Health in Azerbaijan: using COPC as a Tool", showcasing Azerbaijan's progress and sharing outcomes of the PROACT-Care PHC demonstration project (7).

26–27 September 2023

Partnering with journalists, influencers and health professionals to combat misinformation and disinformation. A workshop was conducted entitled "Infodemic Management". The endeavour aimed to enhance the skills of journalists, social media influencers and local health agency representatives with respect to identifying and combating misinformation and disinformation related to vaccinations, with a focus on their impact on public health.

July

August

September



July, September and December 2023

Enhancing disaster response capabilities and ensuring timely and effective interventions during emergencies. National medical staff from Azerbaijan and Türkiye participated in simulation exercises organized under the Emergency Medical Team (EMT) initiative, aimed at enhancing disaster response capabilities and ensuring timely and effective interventions during emergencies.

26 September 2023

Transforming mental health services in post-conflict settings. The project "Coordination and Transformation of Mental Health Services in Post-conflict Settings" came to a close, with long-lasting and beneficial results for the communities involved. The project alleviated mental health and psychosocial suffering in conflict-affected communities, improving access to mental health and psychosocial support services through the WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP).

19–20 October 2023

Civilian–military collaboration workshop for health security preparedness. A 2-day workshop entitled Advancing Civilian–Military Collaboration to Strengthen Health Emergency Preparedness took place with the aim to enhance civil–military health collaboration at the national and subnational level through capacity mapping, and to advance a shared understanding of the opportunities and limitations of civil–military collaboration at the national level.

November 2023

Improving data access through digitalization of immunization information systems.

A technical analysis of Azerbaijan’s immunization-related systems informed the development of the system requirements for the Digitalization Roadmap on Immunization Information Systems. This process was initiated in February 2023 and assessed Azerbaijan’s Immunization Information System.

November 2023

Sustaining sensitive poliovirus surveillance.

To support maintaining polio-free status in Azerbaijan, a WHO group of national and international experts met with institutions involved in poliovirus surveillance and visited Acute Flaccid Paralysis reporting sites and selected wastewater sampling sites. The mission resulted in key recommendations to optimize surveillance of the reporting sites and the environment through the sampling sites; deliver vaccination door-to-door during surveillance visits; and build the capacity of clinical and public health personnel on poliovirus surveillance.

14–17 December 2023

Building capacity for public health through knowledge exchange. Members of the Public Health Team from the WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan attended the 7th International and 24th National Congress on Public Health in Antalya, themed “Public Health on the 100th Anniversary of the Republic: From the Past into the Future”. The delegation shared and obtained feedback on COPC intervention plans developed in Azerbaijan and presented four oral abstracts on COPC plus one on the ASPHER-Competency Framework.²

² Framework for the Public Health Workforce in the WHO European Region is intended to support the implementation of the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – and the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal3 on UHC (8).

October

November

December

22–23 October 2023

Azerbaijan presentation at the commemoration of the 45th anniversary of Alma-Ata and fifth anniversary of the Astana Declaration on PHC. In commemoration of the 45th anniversary of Alma-Ata and the fifth anniversary of the Astana Declaration on PHC, the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the Government of Kazakhstan co-hosted an international conference. Representatives from Azerbaijan, part of the Universal Health Coverage Partnership, attended workshops and conferences focusing on strategic health leadership for the transformation of PHC, held as official side events during the 73rd session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in Astana, Kazakhstan.



21–23 November 2023

Enhancing cooperation and knowledge sharing among national and international experts and institutions on IPC. The Country Office hosted the first national conference to increase awareness about AMR, IPC and One Health, dedicated to World Antibiotic Awareness Week and aligned with the Go Blue Global campaign celebrated by WHO globally.

The conference was attended by over 200 participants, including international experts; IPC and AMR focal points from the Ministries of Health of Georgia, Kazakhstan and Türkiye; representatives from the private sector and United Nations agencies; national partners including the Medical University, the Azerbaijan State Customs Committee and the Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan; and from all three levels of WHO.

This conference was an initial examination of the pilot Point Prevalence Study of HAI and antimicrobial use conducted in two pilot hospitals in 2023 in Baku, Azerbaijan. The event aimed to enhance cooperation and knowledge sharing among experts and institutions from Azerbaijan and neighbouring countries.





3. Key achievements towards advancing GPW 13

3.1 Achieving UHC by expanding access to health services

3.1.1 Context

Since 2017 the Azerbaijani Government has been instituting a series of health-care reforms to strengthen financing mechanisms, improve access to services and enhance financial protection. These reforms resulted in the establishment of SAMHI and TABIB (instituted under SAMHI's umbrella) to oversee the implementation of MHI nationwide. These reforms have standardized health benefit packages and centralized procurement of services. MHI covers 100% of the population, and the Health Benefits Package was expanded in 2023 to encompass 3344 services.

Nonetheless, significant challenges remain towards achieving UHC. Notably, the absence of comprehensive data to assess financial protection limits the possibility of obtaining a full picture of people's ability to access the entire range and quality of health services that they may need, when and where they require them, without experiencing financial hardship. The latest available data predate the implementation of MHI (in 2021 – aimed at covering the population as a whole). It is presumed that out-of-pocket expenditure, particularly for medicines and private health-care access, remains high. In 2020 out-of-pocket expenditure accounted for 65.2% of total health care spending.

The health-care system is characterized by a hospital-centric and specialist physician-focused service delivery, resulting in weaknesses in PHC services and inefficient use of resources. Staff shortages are also a major challenge in the country, particularly in rural areas and in conflict-affected communities. Staff shortages are also driven by broader demographic shifts common throughout countries in the WHO European Region, such as an ageing workforce and migration (either internationally or from rural and underserved zones to urban areas) for better job prospects.

Additionally, until recently Azerbaijan lacked an integrated ECS; a strong and operational ECS is critical for delivering life-saving health care for acute illnesses and injuries throughout the life course and is essential to preparing for and preventing secondary mortality during emergencies.

3.1.2 Primary achievements

The Country Office has supported national efforts towards UHC by:

- ◆ demonstrating the feasibility of expanding access to health services in rural and poorly reached areas if appropriate change pathways are leveraged (Box 2);
- ◆ strengthening country capacity in data to better understand health financing challenges (Box 3); and
- ◆ strengthening the resilience of the health system by improving the quality of emergency care services through training and continuously assessing the capacities of emergency care professionals (Box 4).

Box 2. Expanded availability of health services nationwide and in underserved areas

The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan ran the PROACT-Care PHC project in the Shamakhi Region of Azerbaijan starting in 2020 and finishing in 2023. It focused on three goals: capacity-building, implementing a PHC organizational model and organizing essential PHC functions. From 2021 to 2022 various programmes in Shamakhi, supported by WHO, inspired a new generation of health-care workers to deliver care to remote areas and take up roles in PHC. Critical to this enhancement of motivation was the programme's activity of funding 164 Shamakhi Fellows – medical students, nurses and international experts – to deliver COPC for 6 months, addressing workforce shortages. The project also facilitated national PHC workforce development through conferences and health-care education training, fostering increased health literacy and addressing service gaps. Collaborative efforts, such as an emergency care week in partnership with the Türkiye Ministry of Health, further enhanced rural PHC delivery. The Programme Fellows praised the project for increasing their interest in PHC, with a third remaining in employment within rural PHC settings.

Activities implemented by the Country Office as part of the PROACT-Care project have supported expansion in both the type and the geographical distribution of health services nationwide, through activities intending to:



ensure stronger and more competitive workforce capacity (section 4.1), including cascade training and staff development opportunities to improve staff motivation; and



foster collaboration and exchange across institutions in the country (section 4.3).

Notable achievements in 2023 were as follows.

- ◆ A viable solution to strengthen staff motivation to work in rural areas was demonstrated through programming, which expanded the number of health-care professionals delivering PHC in Shamakhi, a remote region with significant health workforce constraints (7). Initiatives that began in 2021–2022 were continued in 2023 and opportunities for expanding them into other regions were examined. Senior representatives from SAMHI, TABIB and the WHO Country Office visited Shamakhi in May 2023 to assess the efforts that had been made to strengthen PHC services in the region, to better understand the work carried out so far and identify opportunities for future collaborations between WHO and internal health institutions to build on and scale up the successes of this initiative.
- ◆ Over 348 hours of instruction, representing 19 training modules, were undertaken by 120 health-care workers (35 physicians and 85 nurses) as part of the Transition Period Vocational Training Programme for PHC workers at the WHO Shamakhi Training Centre. This initiative aimed to address the shortage of family doctors in Shamakhi, and following its conclusion, the Training Centre relocated to the newly established Reference Family Health Centre, supported by WHO.
- ◆ The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan continues to support mobile clinics operating in remote areas of Shamakhi. Three mobile clinics are delivering PHC services to a population of 15 490 across 18 villages, enhancing access to health care in these communities.
- ◆ The project's tremendous success enabled WHO to secure an additional €9.2 million to enhance PHC in Azerbaijan in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund.

Box 3. Strengthen institutions to enhance financial sustainability in the health sector

Activities implemented by the Country Office have supported data generation and analysis capacities to:



promote knowledge generation and use for decision-making ([section 4.2](#)); and



foster collaboration and exchange across institutions in the country and with other countries ([section 4.3](#)).

To enhance financial sustainability in Azerbaijan's health system, WHO has provided ongoing technical support to institutionalize health spending tracking and support its use for more effective health financing decision-making. WHO conducted workshops to introduce the SHA methodology and data requirements for conducting health accounts studies in the country and is providing technical support to Azerbaijan to help in studying the country context, build local capacity and ensure the sustainability of the SHA procedures. Additionally, the Country Office supported national counterparts including representatives from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, SAMHI, TABIB and the State Statistical Committee to participate in the Fifth Subregional European Meeting on Tracking Health Spending using SHA 2011 Methodology. This platform enabled discussions on health expenditure tracking in eastern Europe and central Asia, fostering knowledge exchange and learning from experiences of other countries.



© WHO

Box 4. Establishing ECS to enhance preparedness for future emergencies

Significant efforts have been dedicated to enhancing the Azerbaijani ECS, aiming to support progress towards UHC and improve access to quality essential health services. This has involved immediate actions such as developing emergency medicine departments, alongside long-term initiatives to establish comprehensive medical training programmes and curricula. These measures are designed to ensure that future health professionals are equipped to operate effectively within the ECS, thereby facilitating improved access to essential health services.

These achievements have been primarily advanced through mechanisms which aim to:



ensure stronger and more competitive workforce capacity ([section 4.1](#)), both by strengthening capacity of existing health professionals and by establishing medical training programmes;



promote knowledge generation and use for decision-making ([section 4.2](#)), by assessing the capacity of health emergency units and develop plans for improvement; and



promote collaboration and exchange across institutions in Azerbaijan to implement a shared vision for ECS and with international organizations to promote learning and uptake of good practices ([section 4.3](#)).

Specific achievements include the following.

- ◆ Gaps defined and recommendations shared with eight health facilities to inform future planning and strengthen emergency care capacity and provision, based on findings from the WHO Hospital Emergency Unit Assessment Tool.
- ◆ The AMU Emergency Medicine Department was founded and became operational in 2023 and now provides the first specialized and standardized emergency medicine training programme in Azerbaijan at any level (both undergraduate and postgraduate). The launch of this programme was made possible via WHO's establishment of the ECS Capacity Group, representing a dedicated effort to develop a network of experts capable of driving the transformation of emergency medicine in Azerbaijan. Eight members of the Capacity Group were selected as faculty members at the newly established AMU Emergency Medicine Department. Through their involvement in the Capacity Group, these faculty members received training at Turkish universities from emergency medicine experts, providing them with valuable first-hand experience in ECS organization, hospital case management, education processes and emergency unit design.
- ◆ Several training courses were developed to enhance the skills of ECS workers. These included an Emergency Medicine Clerkship Programme for medical students and establishment of the SUM-Sim Training Centre (Simulation and Training Centre, Sumgait City), which provided dedicated training for emergency care professionals. Additionally, a comprehensive Emergency Risk Management Inservice Training Programme was developed for PHC workers. Notably, the Centre hosted key training sessions such as basic life support, advanced cardiac life support and prehospital trauma life support, benefiting a total of 940 participants. Furthermore, a train-the-trainer course was conducted in prehospital trauma life support to ensure sustainable training across the country.

3.2 Addressing health emergencies

3.2.1 Context

Ensuring operational readiness for effectively assessing and managing health emergencies, including both anticipated and unforeseen challenges, is a major priority in Azerbaijan. Comprehensive assessments are crucial for addressing unforeseen challenges, identifying needs and devising mitigation strategies. Operational readiness depends on having established collaborations ready and in place for activation during emergencies, along with a clear understanding of existing resources and gaps. It also requires robust capacity for RCCE, as well as streamlined policies and systems for prompt crisis responses.

Strengthening IPC is also key to these efforts. In this regard, Azerbaijan's capacity to address health emergencies is hindered by fragmented surveillance and laboratory systems, exacerbated by hierarchical and centralized structures. Fragmentation between human and animal sectors poses risks to containing diseases with pandemic potential, and parallel vertical systems and barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration further compound challenges.

Separate surveillance systems impede information-sharing among institutions across sectors such as the Ministry of Health, TABIB and the Ministry of Agriculture. Outdated protocols and fragmented information systems hamper effective surveillance and response efforts, as do challenges with linking information across systems, which are further devalued by factors such as poor Internet connectivity in field settings. Similarly, coordination difficulties and outdated procedures in laboratory systems hinder disease surveillance and response efforts, highlighting the need for improved integration and alignment with international recommendations.

3.2.2 Primary achievements

To address these gaps, the Country Office has supported national efforts to:

- ◆ assess and enhance operational readiness to assess and manage identified risks and vulnerabilities for health emergencies (Box 5);
- ◆ implement activities for effective IPC, including for priority diseases, mitigating risks of AMR (Box 6); and
- ◆ enhance capacity for RCCE and infodemic management (Box 7).

Box 5. Enhanced operational readiness for health emergencies

Operational readiness relating to health emergencies has been improved through efforts to strengthen the capacity of facilities (laboratories) and establish the cross-sectoral links required to rapidly mobilize an effective response in health emergencies.

These achievements have been primarily advanced through mechanisms which aim to:



ensure stronger and more competitive workforce capacity (section 4.1), by strengthening capacity for evaluation through the JEE and capacity of laboratory technicians;

Box 5. contd



promote knowledge generation and use for decision-making (section 4.2), by assessing the capacity of laboratories and using insights from assessments to inform development plans and strategies;



foster collaboration and exchange across institutions in the country (section 4.3); and



enhance public awareness (section 4.4).

Notable achievements include the following.

- ◆ Laboratory capacity and functions in Azerbaijan were strengthened through the development of a National Laboratory Policy and Strategic Plan, informed by a WHO-supported assessment of the national and facility-level laboratory system. Additionally, a series of WHO-led training sessions for laboratory staff on biosafety and biosecurity contributed to enhanced service quality. Based on assessment findings and identified gaps, the policy and strategy, aligned with WHO guidelines, encompass biosafety and biosecurity, quality management, education and training, as well as national standards and resources for a safe built environment. A multisectoral National Laboratory Working Group, comprising representatives from the Ministry of Health, TABIB, Food Safety Agency, Ministry of Justice, State Customs Committee and the private sector, coordinated the development of this strategy under the guidance of WHO experts.
- ◆ Multisectoral cooperation for emergency preparedness and response, as endorsed under the International Health Regulations 2005, was strengthened through collaborative processes, such as the preparation of the annual country report using the WHO States Parties Self-Assessment Annual Reporting Tool (e-SPAR). Cooperation was strengthened between the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Defence in Azerbaijan, facilitated by WHO-supported intersectoral collaboration initiatives and national-level workshops for both sectors, which supported analysis of intersectoral capacity in ensuring sanitary and epidemiological safety.
- ◆ Additionally, national experts from across sectors (Food Safety Agency, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Ecology, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Transport, SAMHI, State Custom Committee, TABIB and others) and a multisectoral external team contributed through a consultative process to the JEE, which assessed Azerbaijan's capacity to prevent, detect and rapidly respond to public health threats. This process facilitated the establishment of connections between involved stakeholders, while also enhancing national capacity for improved evaluation, as participants gained knowledge on more effective capacity assessment techniques. The completion of the JEE also enhanced operational readiness for emergency preparedness, as Azerbaijan became eligible to apply for financing from the Pandemic Fund. Additionally, the findings will support evidence-informed decision-making, as they will be utilized in the development of a National Action Plan for Health Security.
- ◆ WHO initiated the establishment of the EMT and is supporting the country in building its capacity. This support includes organizing several training sessions, including training for trainers and simulation exercises. These activities are targeted at national medical staff from the Ministry of Emergency Situations, Ministry of Health and TABIB in Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Box 6. Strengthened IPC

WHO has supported national efforts to strengthen IPC via mechanisms which aim to:



promote knowledge generation and use for decision-making (section 4.2) through IPC assessments in health-care facilities; and



strengthening institutions for health by establishing national norms and standards relating to IPC and by fostering collaboration and exchange with other countries (section 4.3).

Achievements include the following.

- ◆ Gaps were identified through various IPC assessments supported by WHO in health facilities and have led to targeted interventions, such as donations of laundry equipment to five hospitals to address specific needs. Laundry assessments and completion of the Infection Prevention and Control Self-Assessment Framework in pilot hospitals contributed the evidence needed to identify these gaps (9).
- ◆ National norms and standards relating to IPC were established through the implementation of dual national IPC guidelines that sought to standardize IPC practices across health-care institutions, as well as through the establishment of an IPC Working Group to oversee the implementation of the national IPC programme. The Working Group has representatives from the Ministry of Health and TABIB and aligns with WHO's IPC Core Components; this marks a crucial step towards ensuring consistent and sustainable IPC practices at national level. Guidelines were also drafted in alignment with WHO policy considerations, addressing best practices in injections and related procedures, as well as occupational risks and management of bloodborne pathogens.
- ◆ To enhance the effectiveness of the national IPC Working Group, members made a study visit to the Swedish Public Health Agency in Stockholm, Sweden; the WHO Collaborating Centre for Antimicrobial Resistance in Berlin, Germany; and the WHO Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen, Denmark. This visit provided valuable insights into the organization of the Swedish IPC system, including practical experiences at national, subregional and facility levels, as well as discussions on AMR and stewardship. The tour facilitated shared learning and laid the groundwork for long-term cooperation to support the development of Azerbaijan's National IPC Programme, with discussions also held concerning IPC strategy development and HAI surveillance. Additionally, field visits to the newborn baby unit of Karolinska University Hospital and the National AMR and Healthcare-associated Infection Laboratory provided insights into surveillance activities and testing procedures, while discussions with technical teams at the WHO Regional Office for Europe explored potential collaboration on IPC and AMR activities in Azerbaijan.

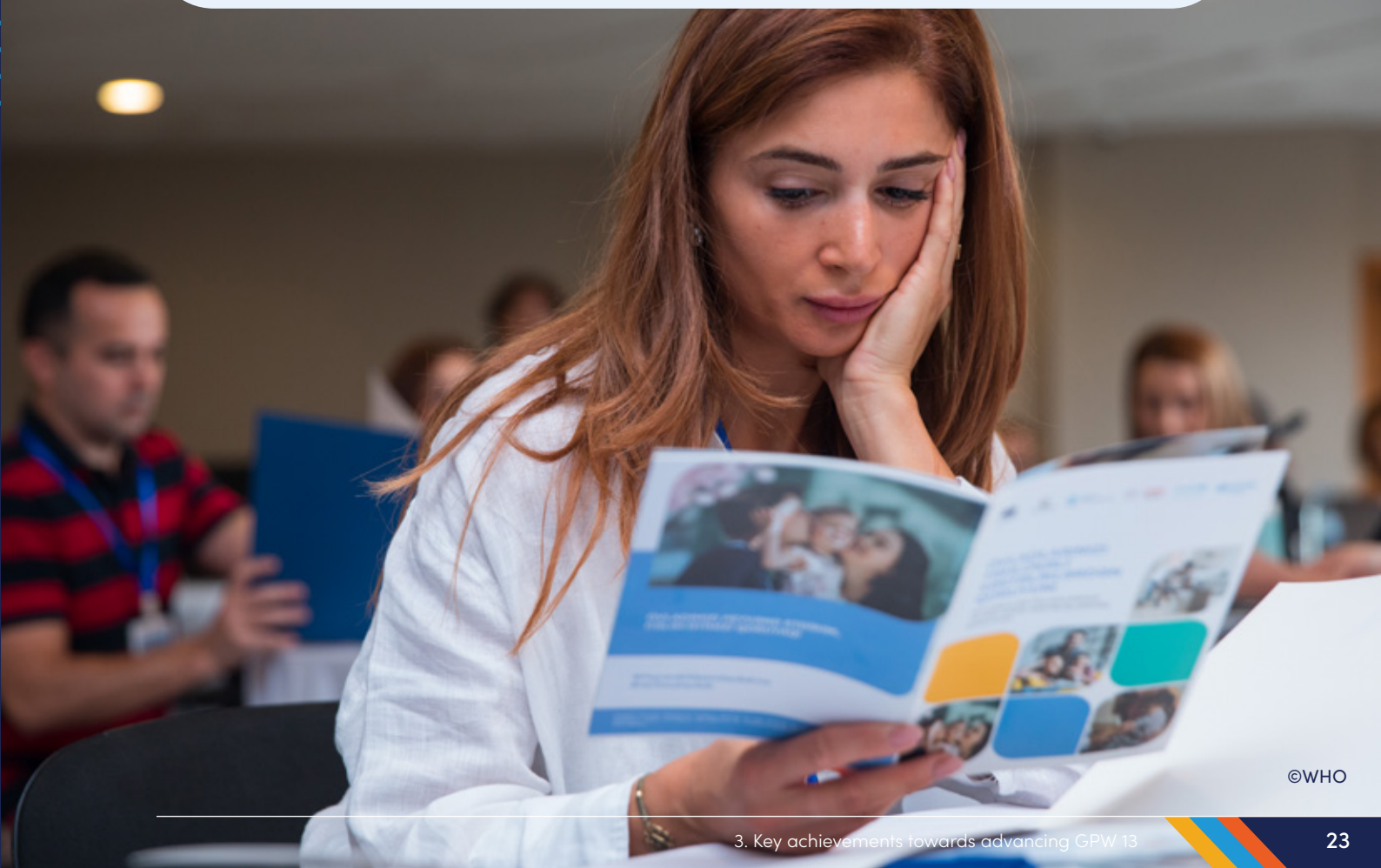
Box 7. Enhanced capacity for RCCE and infodemic management to enable effective responses to health emergencies



The Country Office has contributed to enabling effective responses to health emergencies through mechanisms which aim to enhance public awareness (section 4.4).

One achievement was infodemic management and enhanced public awareness of vaccines through WHO effectively reaching the public on these topics by leveraging prominent public voices. The Country Office delivered infodemic management training to journalists for the first time, as well as to social media influencers and representatives from local health agencies, to build capacity to identify and combat misinformation and disinformation related to vaccination. Assessments conducted before and after the training revealed a notable increase in knowledge and skills among participants. Additionally, by engaging social media influencers with strong links to the public, the messages received greater traction and the Country Office received invitations to radio channels, providing even further opportunities to engage with the public and spread awareness.

The Country Office is also laying the groundwork for ongoing expanded engagement by establishing an official LinkedIn account. This initiative has increased the organization's online presence, fostering networking, information dissemination and stakeholder connections, therefore amplifying impact and outreach. The account has over 1000 followers and continues to grow rapidly.



3.3 Promoting healthier populations

3.3.1 Context

Improvements in safely managed drinking-water, road safety and tobacco control are driving positive changes in the health of the Azerbaijani population. However, worsening trends in air quality, obesity and other risk factors for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) contribute negatively to overall population health and offset gains made through other health determinants (10). While data gaps are a challenge, estimates show that NCDs cause 90% of recorded deaths in Azerbaijan and 81% of years lost to disability (11,12). About one third of the adult population in Azerbaijan has three or more risk factors for NCDs, while almost two thirds has one or two risk factors.

Inequities persist, particularly between regions and between urban and rural populations. Rural populations in Azerbaijan face multiple vulnerabilities, due to factors such as limited physical and financial access to health care, low levels of health education and awareness, economic hardship and inadequate infrastructure. Their reliance on small-scale farming and animal husbandry exposes them to heightened risks of zoonotic diseases, amplifying both economic and health impacts.

Inequities between regions are further reflected in challenges with routine childhood vaccination coverage. Azerbaijan observed declines in measles, mumps and rubella vaccination in 2022 and rising numbers of measles cases were detected in 2023. Barriers to immunization include capacities for vaccine storage and delivery. Additionally, according to formative research by WHO in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and TABIB, vaccine hesitancy is driven by knowledge gaps among health workers regarding vaccine safety and contraindications and the influence of social media on decision-making.

3.3.2 Primary achievements

To address these gaps, the Country Office has supported national efforts to:

- ◆ strengthen public health institutions (Box 8);
- ◆ improve access to mental health services (Box 9); and
- ◆ accelerate the elimination and eradication of high-impact communicable diseases through immunization (Box 10).



©WHO

Box 8. Strengthen public health functions

The Country Office has supported the establishment and reform of key groups and institutions responsible for protecting public health in the country. It has contributed to this primarily through mechanisms which aim to:



promote knowledge generation and use for decision-making (section 4.2); and



foster collaboration and exchange among institutions and sectors in the country (section 4.3).

Key achievements are as follows.

- ◆ A summary health profile was developed to improve understanding of the main drivers of poor health in Azerbaijan and support policy- and decision-making.
- ◆ The 13 disparate Government agencies and institutions working in public health were brought together to discuss the major issues. The group reached a strong consensus on the need to improve coordination and collaboration to strengthen public health in Azerbaijan, emphasizing a collective commitment to improving the public health landscape. WHO convened further meetings in Azerbaijan with the aim to create a shared understanding of the gaps and foster collaboration involving national and international partners. This group was supported by an international reference group with representation from key international organizations working in public health (representatives from the Association of Schools of Public Health of the WHO European Region, the European Public Health Association, the International Association of Public Health Institutes, the United Kingdom Health Security Agency, University College Dublin and the University of Maastricht).
- ◆ Evidence-informed recommendations were suggested for enhancing the work of hygiene and epidemiology centres. In response to a Ministry of Health request for support with reforming the centres' traditional structures, a group of national and international WHO experts visited selected hygiene and epidemiology centres and organized a workshop to validate findings and raise awareness among managers of the centres on the need for modernizing public health services.

Box 9. Improve access to mental health services

Significant efforts have been made to expand access to mental health services, particularly in rural areas, as well as to promote the uptake of such services through mechanisms which aim to:



ensure stronger and more competitive workforce capacity (section 4.1); and



enhance public awareness of health and services to reduce stigma (section 4.4).

Key achievements were as follows.

- ◆ WHO facilitated collaboration across several institutions in Azerbaijan to improve mental health services, establishing a national coordination group involving TABIB, the Ministry of Health, clinicians and partners such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Cabinet of Ministers.
- ◆ Access to mental health services was expanded in conflict-affected regions through PHC facilities, which now serve over 35 000 patients across five regions (Aghdam, Aghjabadi, Barda, Fuzuli and Tartar). Additionally, psychologists and social workers were deployed to regional hospitals. This expanded access was enabled through support from the mhGAP, which has trained 20 psychiatrists and PHC physicians, who in turn have trained over 170 others in underserved districts through a train-the-trainer programme. Training sessions included simulations and were followed by monthly supervision visits to ensure knowledge application and sustainability of the programme. The train-the-trainer programme was a crucial first step in helping to improve the capacities of PHC providers to address mental health and supported narrowing the gap in mental health service availability in regions.
- ◆ Over 5000 individuals were reached through six educational campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health and promote service uptake. These campaigns led to increased access to mental health services, with many participants receiving brief consultations from trained professionals, indicating a positive impact on service utilization.

Box 10. Accelerate immunization efforts to eliminate and eradicate communicable diseases

Expanding immunization capacities and ensuring uptake of vaccines is crucial for ensuring healthy populations. The Country Office has advanced this goal by establishing the necessary cold-chain infrastructure required for vaccine storage and by promoting vaccine uptake. The primary mechanisms which have been used to achieve these objectives aim to:



promote knowledge generation and use for decision-making (section 4.2); and



enhance public awareness of health and services promote uptake (section 4.4).

Key achievements include the following.

- ◆ Storage capacity has been developed for a newly purchased hexavalent vaccine and preemptively for rotavirus and human papillomavirus vaccines, allowing Azerbaijan to purchase and safely store these vaccines at the appropriate temperature to retain efficacy and enable effective delivery to the population. To achieve this, WHO procured vaccine refrigerators and continuous temperature monitoring devices and systems to cover 100% of immediate subnational capacity gaps and needs for monitoring safe storage conditions. Additionally, transportation capacity was improved by adding three refrigerated vehicles to the central store, enabling distribution of efficacious vaccines throughout the country. The procurement plan was informed by evidence generated by the Ministry of Health with support from WHO in 2022, using an inventory and gap analysis. Promoting widespread knowledge of these achievements can also enhance public acceptability of vaccines by building trust in their safety and efficacy.
- ◆ WHO Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Health and TABIB, in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund, delivered a successful vaccination campaign during which hundreds of children were immunized in regions with low immunization rates (Gobustan, Goygol, Mingachevir and Yevlakh). Of these, 80% were either unvaccinated or undervaccinated, demonstrating the value of the outreach. Additionally, monitoring of caregiver hesitation regarding vaccination for 6 months after the campaign revealed that it decreased by up to 45% in some regions. Evidence was key to this initiative's success; WHO supported the Ministry of Health to conduct formative research about the barriers and drivers of routine immunization and used the results of this work to plan a campaign strategy that effectively enhanced public awareness and built trust among communities to promote uptake of vaccination.





4. Mechanisms of action

The WHO Country Office in Azerbaijan has contributed to advancing delivery of the GPW 13 strategic priorities through four key mechanisms of action:



The section below describes these mechanisms and the pathways through which they operate.



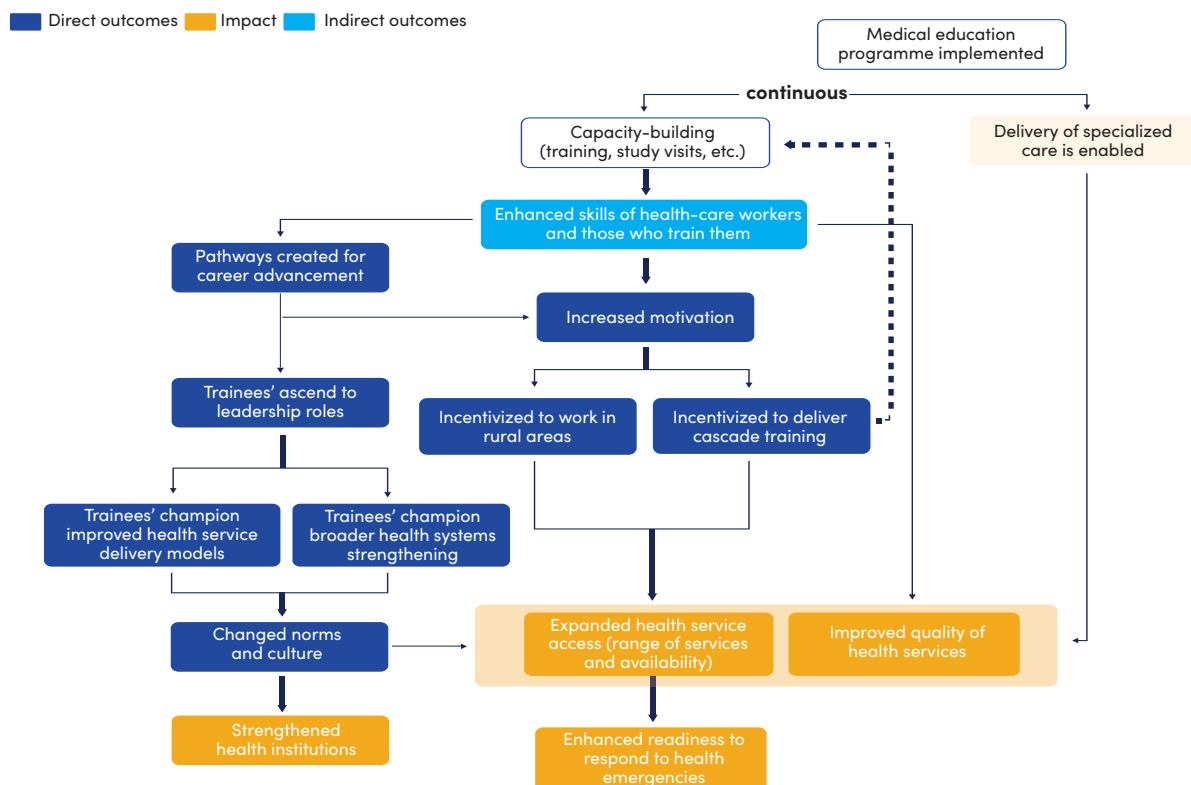
4.1 Ensuring stronger and more competitive workforce capacity

One of the primary strategies implemented by the Country Office to drive sustainable improvements within the health system is through comprehensive capacity-building initiatives. Beyond the immediate goals of enhancing the proficiency and capabilities of the current health-care workforce, thereby improving health service quality, capacity-building serves as a catalyst for instigating lasting transformations by:

- ◆ effectively incentivizing through capacity-building offers to expand access to rural health services;
- ◆ expanding the availability of skilled health professionals and expanding access to health services through cascade training;
- ◆ nurturing and empowering champions who will advocate for and potentially drive health service transformation, thereby contributing to improved service access and quality; and
- ◆ developing and modernizing the academic curriculum to improve health-care quality in the long term by ensuring that current and future generations of health professionals possess necessary skills for delivering services and can support preparedness for health emergencies by establishing the infrastructure and services required for swift response.

This is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Effect of capacity-building initiatives in the health workforce





4.2 Promoting knowledge generation and use for policy- and decision-making

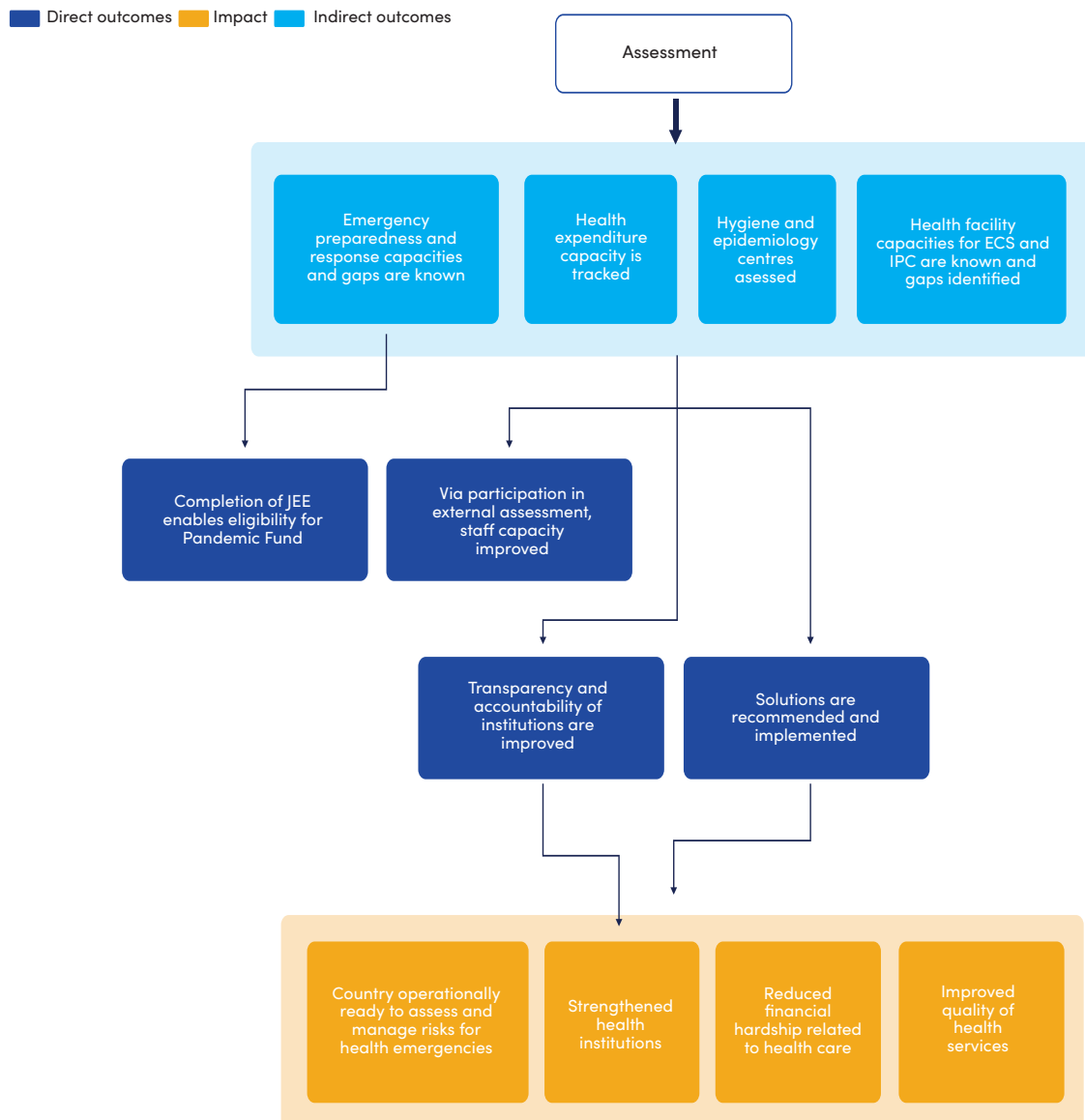
Assessments are essential tools for knowledge generation, facilitating evidence-informed decision-making processes. In Azerbaijan, evaluations of capacities for IPC, emergency response readiness, health expenditure tracking and other areas have been used not only to identify capacity gaps but also to monitor progress and support the formulation of strategies for necessary improvements. Additionally, these assessments have prompted the implementation of targeted solutions to address identified deficiencies.

Besides generating knowledge, the participatory processes to assessments promoted and enabled by the Country Office supported transformation by:

- ◆ helping to generate a shared understanding among stakeholders and informing solutions;
- ◆ improving transparency and accountability, thereby contributing to strengthened institutions;
- ◆ setting the baselines of current status and serving as a tool for monitoring progress in the future; and
- ◆ highlighting data needs and gaps, which can set the foundations for a culture of evidence-informed policy- and decision-making.

The significance of assessments in generating insights that can help to advance priority objectives is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Fig.2. Assessment-related pathways of change





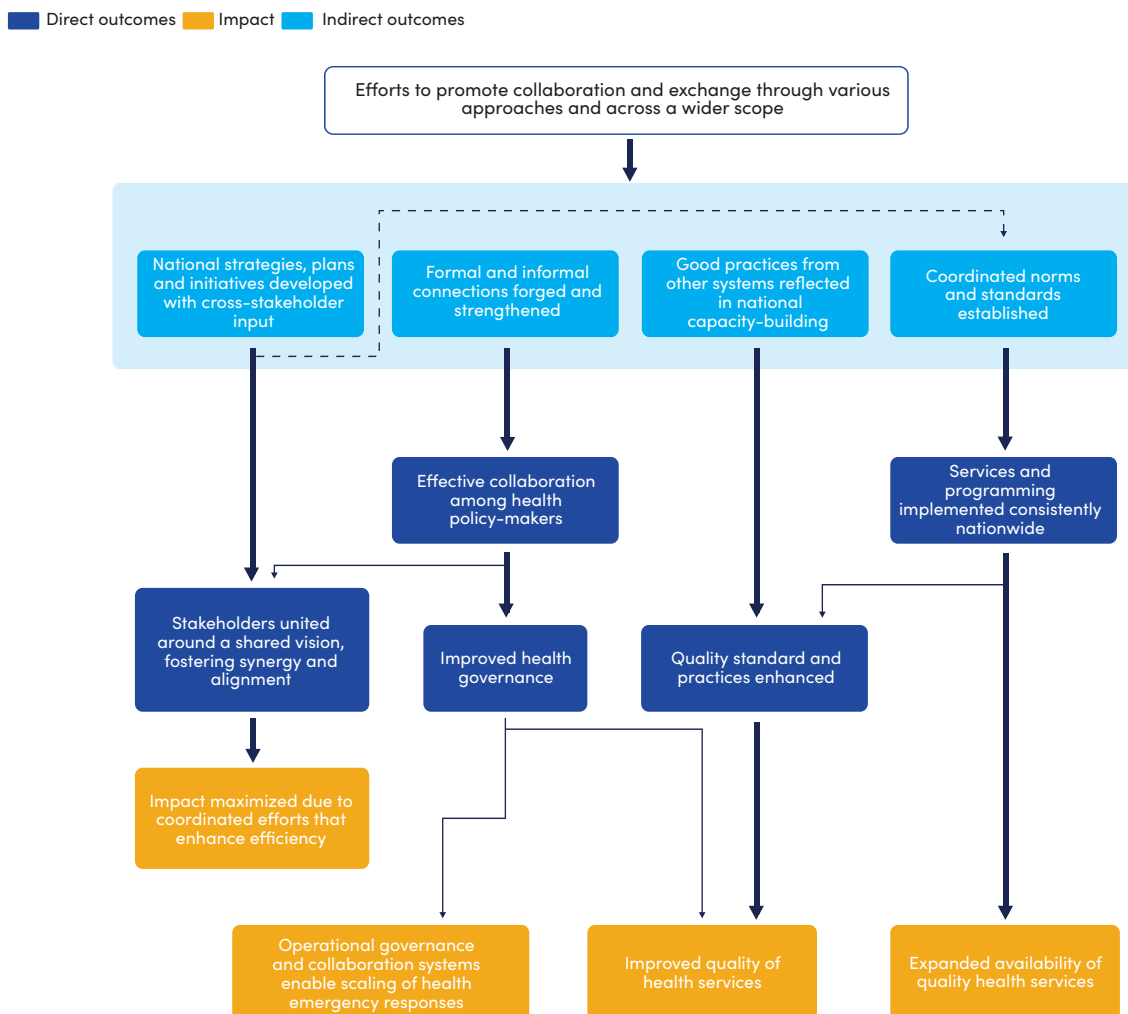
4.3 Promoting collaboration and exchange across institutions, regions, sectors and with other countries

The Country Office has been actively engaged in facilitating coordination and collaboration among institutions within the country, between regions and internationally. This approach advances country priorities, particularly in fostering coherence and coordination among various ministries and sectors. Central to this approach is the acknowledgement that a resilient health system relies on coordinated efforts to achieve shared objectives, promoting efficiency by minimizing duplication and maximizing the impact of resources.

WHO has effectively utilized its convening power to foster the exchange of knowledge and information, spanning thematic areas of work, Government institutions, regions within Azerbaijan and international collaborations (Fig. 3). This collaborative approach has been instrumental in advancing priorities through:

- ◆ facilitating co-development and revision of guidelines, standard operating procedures and programmes across multiple domains to promote consistent services and practices nationwide (Box 6);
- ◆ Bringing together cross-sectoral actors to set strategic directions, promoting stakeholders being united around a shared vision, fostering synergy and alignment (section 3.2, Boxes 5 and 8); and
- ◆ facilitating knowledge exchange with international experience through conferences and study visits, fostering uptake of good practices from other systems to enhance quality standards and practices in Azerbaijan, while at the same time increasing visibility of good practices from Azerbaijan (section 3.2).

Fig. 3. Effect of collaboration and exchange on service provision





4.4 Enhancing public awareness on health issues and health-care services

Several initiatives implemented by WHO in Azerbaijan have drawn on efforts to enhance public awareness as a mechanism for advancing public health goals.

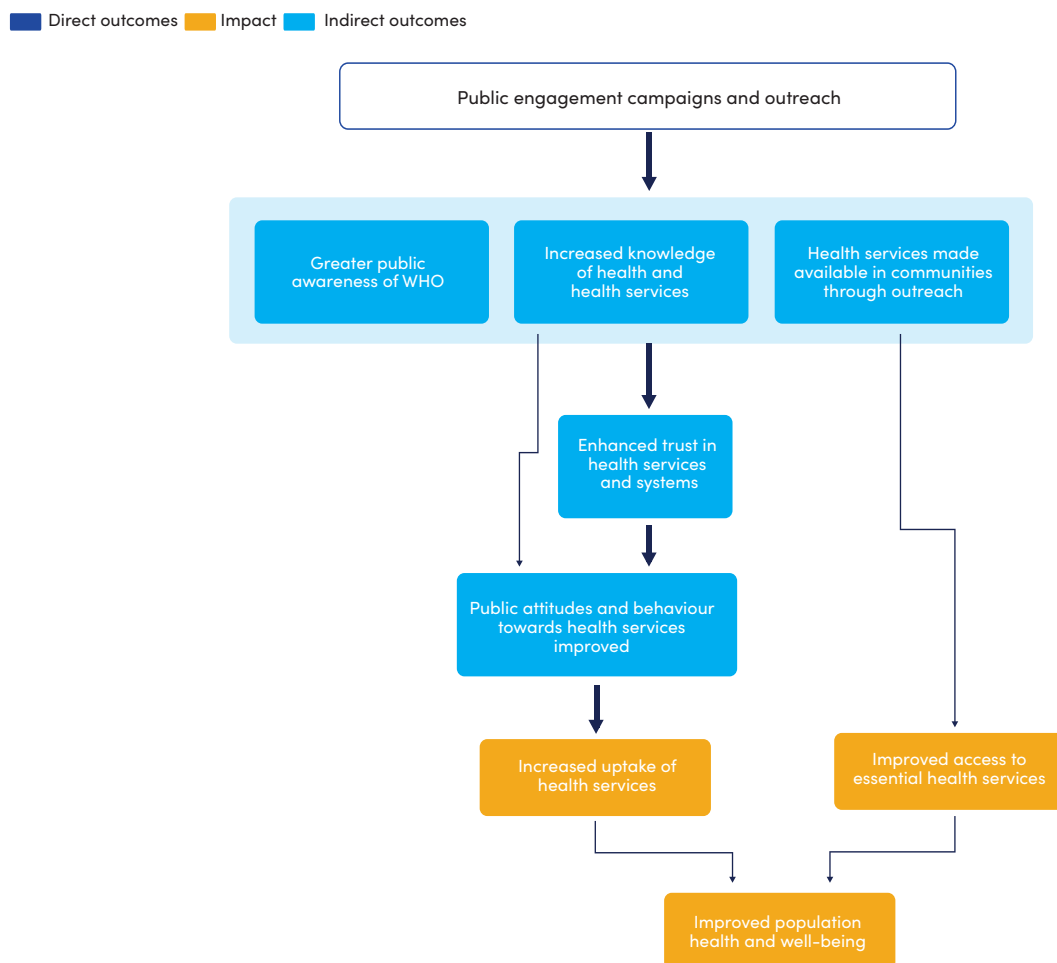
Efforts to enhance public awareness on health issues and health-care services have been used to enhance knowledge, change attitudes and behaviours and ultimately promote the uptake of essential health services and advance public health objectives. These efforts have also helped to enhance public knowledge of WHO and its work and, therefore, improve trust and the possibility of WHO getting key health messages across.

Some pathways through which this mechanism has operated include:

- ◆ making health services available in communities through outreach by trusted professionals, which has helped to improve access to those services and enhance trust in them, thereby supporting increased uptake (Boxes 9 and 10);
- ◆ expanding WHO's ability to reach communities with relevant health information and trustworthy health messages, for example through WHO experts delivering community-based training and events, such as the cardiopulmonary resuscitation training conducted in Baku shopping malls (section 3.2); and WHO's outreach through social media such as LinkedIn (section 3.2) and existing virtual channels (Box 7).

Fig. 4 illustrates the effects of such outreach efforts.

Fig. 4. Effect of enhancing public awareness on health issues and health-care services







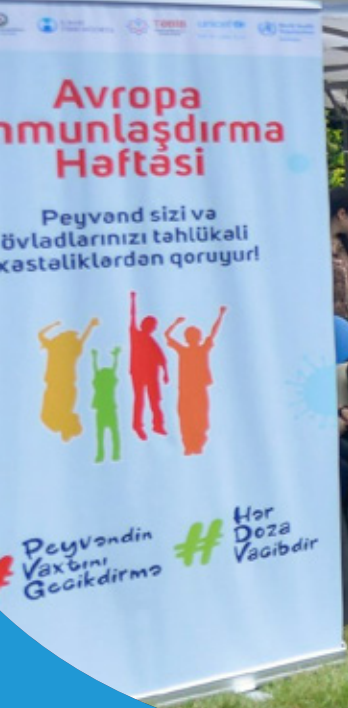
5. Lessons learned

Four particular lessons can be derived from the analysis of the work of the Country Office over 2023.

- ◆ **Capacity-building can be used to motivate health workers to work in underserved areas.** Engaging young graduates early in their careers and providing vocational training programmes has proved highly effective in motivating health workers to serve in Shamakhi. This approach, now being replicated in other parts of Azerbaijan, offers a scalable model for addressing similar challenges across the WHO European Region.
- ◆ **Trusted communication channels can be leveraged to enhance public awareness on health issues.** Building on existing trusted communication channels has proved instrumental in achieving enhanced public awareness of vaccines and in infodemic management. WHO effectively reached the public by leveraging prominent voices, resulting in increased traction for messages. Engaging social media influencers with strong public links further amplified these efforts, leading to invitations to radio channels and providing additional opportunities to engage the public and spread awareness. Vaccination rates were also boosted through strategies that addressed caregiver hesitancy using trusted health facility staff who engaged with hesitant caregivers to provide reliable answers and information about vaccines; this helped to dispel myths, resulting in increased vaccination of previously unvaccinated or undervaccinated individuals. Monitoring showed up to a 45% decrease in hesitation after the campaign. The importance of engaging parents directly is supported by the regional variations observed in decreased vaccine hesitancy, influenced by factors such as low number of village health facilities and absence of epidemiologist staff in regional hygiene and epidemiology centres.
- ◆ **Cascade training can yield sustainable outcomes in capacity-building initiatives.** The Faculty Development Programme at AMU and the Azerbaijan State Advanced Training Institute for Doctors led to the formation of both a department on medical and health science education at AMU and a working group based in the Institute for Doctors, which autonomously developed and implemented train-the-trainer programmes across various medical institutions and fostered a transformative shift in medical education. Similarly, the mhGAP established a train-the-trainer programme supervised by international experts and ensuring continuous knowledge transfer and application through regular supervision sessions; this enabled a sustained expansion of trained medical professionals.
- ◆ **Systemic change can be achieved by leveraging the dedication of motivated individuals.** The ECS and Public Health Capacity Groups have demonstrated the power of concerted efforts in building a network of proficient experts capable of spearheading the evolution of emergency medicine and public health in Azerbaijan. The projects have provided opportunities for skill enhancement and empowerment, enabling participants to effect lasting changes in their fields.







6. Looking forward

Reflecting on the achievements and progress made so far, it is also crucial to identify key needs and chart a path forward for the advancement of health care in Azerbaijan. Priority areas that demand concerted efforts and strategic investments are as follows.

- ◆ **Vision for health.** There is a pressing need for a comprehensive, multiyear national health plan that transcends political cycles and is guided by clear strategic priorities set out by the Ministry of Health to ensure continuity and sustainability in health-care initiatives.
- ◆ **Investment in PHC.** Shifting investment from hospitals and specialized centres to PHC and prevention is essential. This includes prioritizing rural areas and ensuring equitable access to essential services across all regions.
- ◆ **Streamlining the public health system.** Streamlining essential public health functions across the country is imperative to enable swift activation of response measures during health emergencies. A unified system for surveillance, data reporting and an early warning, alert and response system are essential to enhance coordination and effectiveness in disease surveillance and outbreak response. Beyond the traditional health entities such as TABIB and the Ministry of Health, other sectors such as customs, agriculture, environment and education play crucial roles in public health. There is a need for a cohesive system and collaboration platforms that integrate health functions across all relevant actors, ensuring seamless collaboration and information sharing.
- ◆ **Investment in human capital.** The health-care workforce is the backbone of the health system. Investing in capacity-building and professional development is paramount to enhance the skills, knowledge and motivation of health-care professionals, thereby improving service delivery and health outcomes.
- ◆ **Coordinated RCCE.** Increasing awareness and capacity among national health partners for coordinated RCCE efforts is essential. Effective communication strategies and community engagement initiatives are vital for building trust, disseminating accurate health information and mobilizing community action during health crises.

Addressing these key needs will be critical to building a resilient, equitable and sustainable health-care system that can effectively meet the evolving health needs in Azerbaijan.

References¹

1. The 17 Goals [website]. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).
2. United Nations Azerbaijan sustainable development cooperation framework (2021–2025). Baku: United Nations Azerbaijan; 2021 (https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Azerbaijan-UNSDCF-2021-2025_1.pdf).
3. Order on approval of “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development”. Baku: President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev; 2021 (<https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474>).
4. İcbari tibbi sığortanın Xidətlər Zərfinə yeni tibbi xidmətlər əlavə edildi: Nazirlər Kabinetinin 263 N^o-li Qərarına dair izah [Explanation of Cabinet of Ministers Decision No. 263: new medical services have been added to the service envelope of compulsory medical insurance]. Baku: Azerbaijan Republic Cabinet of Ministers; 2023 (<https://nk.gov.az/az/xeberler/matbuat-xidmatinin-bulletenlari/icbari-tibbi-sigortanin-xidmetler-zerfine-yeni-tib-2940>) (in Azerbaijani).
5. Mission and vision: mission of the Ministry of Health [website]. Ministry of Public Health; 2024 (<https://sehiyye.gov.az/en/nazirlik/missiya-ve-baxis/>).
6. Geospatial, location data for a better world: Azerbaijan. New York: United Nations Geospatial; 2024 (<https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/azerbaijan>).
7. PROACT-Care and Shamakhi Fellowship Programme: supporting PHC resilience and health workforce development in Azerbaijan [news release]. World Health Organization; 2022 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/accelerating-phc-resilience-health-workforce-development-azerbaijan>).
8. WHO-ASPHER competency framework for the public health workforce in the European Region. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2020 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/347866>).
9. Infection prevention and control assessment framework at the facility level. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2018 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/330072>). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
10. Country profile: Azerbaijan. In: European Health Information Gateway [online database]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024 (<https://gateway.euro.who.int/en/country-profiles/azerbaijan/>). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
11. WHO methods and data sources for global burden of disease estimates. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/374896>).
12. Global burden of disease study 2019 data resources [online database]. Seattle (WA): Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation; 2019 (<https://ghdx.healthdata.org/gbd-2019>).

¹ All references were accessed on 15 June 2024.



World Health Organization

75 HEALTH FOR ALL

WHO's 75th Anniversary





The WHO Regional Office for Europe

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

Member States

Albania	Greece	Portugal
Andorra	Hungary	Republic of Moldova
Armenia	Iceland	Romania
Austria	Ireland	Russian Federation
Azerbaijan	Israel	San Marino
Belarus	Italy	Serbia
Belgium	Kazakhstan	Slovakia
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kyrgyzstan	Slovenia
Bulgaria	Latvia	Spain
Croatia	Lithuania	Sweden
Cyprus	Luxembourg	Switzerland
Czechia	Malta	Tajikistan
Denmark	Monaco	Türkiye
Estonia	Montenegro	Turkmenistan
Finland	Netherlands (Kingdom of the)	Ukraine
France	North Macedonia	United Kingdom
Georgia	Norway	Uzbekistan
Germany	Poland	

WHO/EURO:2024-10547-50319-75914 (PDF)
WHO/EURO:2024-10547-50319-76389 (print)

WHO Regional Office for Europe
WHO Azerbaijan
62 Uzeyir Hajibeyov, 5th Floor
Baku, Azerbaijan

Telephone/Fax: +994 12 437 28 96
<https://www.who.int/azerbaijan>